

Philoctetes and the Good Companion Story

Arthur W. Frank
University of Calgary

Abstract

The idea of a *companion story* is developed through an analysis of Sophocles' play *Philoctetes*, about living in chronic pain. That story is anchored by an ethnographic report of a boy living with pain, and his companion story. The good companion story is distinguished by three qualities: it consoles its companion, it complicates lives that it enters, and it promises a form of hope. The article thus seeks to demonstrate the therapeutic capacity of stories to effect healing.

Keywords

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Contact

arthurwfrank@gmail.com

This article continues a project of imagining a dialogical phenomenology of stories. I understand stories as mediating relations between consciousness and the world. Stories affect what a person foregrounds as most relevant in perception, and how those foregrounded perceptions are evaluated, especially with respect to potential courses of action, including approval/disapproval, engagement/disengagement, passivity/aggression, and so forth (Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe*).

I have labeled this interest *socio-narratology*, which most broadly means using tools of literary narratology to ask questions that are social scientific, e.g., the development of individual identity, the formation and maintenance of groups, the continuing integration of cultures, and the mobilization of political actions. Stories initially teach people what *counts* as a self, as a group (families, clubs), and as a nation-state. Stories continue to teach what is expected in relationships with certain entities, under what conditions. They teach what can be beneficial and what can be dangerous. Stories teach whom to trust, and shared knowledge and interpretation of a story is a significant token of membership in trusting relationships.

Stories are always situated within relations of storytelling, including a teller, a listener, and the story. The same story enters into multiple storytelling relations, showing observable similarities in different tellings, but also changing more or less subtly according to the contingencies of the relationship and its context. Stories not only feature shape-shifters as one character type; stories themselves are shape-shifters. As stories take new shapes, they convince those who tell them that they are original in that telling. The phenomenological givenness of a story is to appear as newly created in each retelling, and thus as distinctly the teller's own story. Studying stories requires a dual awareness that includes both a respect for people's sense of the originality and uniqueness of stories they take to be distinctly their own, balanced by a recognition that any story recombines narrative templates, plots, character types, tropes, and other elements that are part of generally available cultural stocks of knowledge. From the former perspective, stories are told as being one's own, in

a strong possessive sense. From the latter perspective, no one ever owns a story. Stories are the ultimate cosmopolitans, traveling without passport or entry visa, settling wherever and then claiming to provide locals with their distinctive identity as people who tell those stories.¹

Among the stories any person knows, *companion stories* are those that have primacy in conducting that person's perception and subsequent actions. Stories *conduct* persons, again, by indicating what counts as a perceptual foreground, how to evaluate what is perceived, and how to act in response. Consciousness is thus a dialogue proceeding on at least three levels. One level is the dialogue between characters within the story, each representing his or her perspective. A second level is the dialogue between multiple stories within a person's consciousness, each competing to be the principle conductor of awareness and action. Third is the external dialogue of a person with others in interactions, and that person's encounter with the stories those others are being conducted by, whether or not those stories are brought to articulation in speech.

Writing about stories in this abstract voice violates what I seek to observe as a principle of narrative work, which is to think *with* stories rather than talk about them (Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*). Analysis becomes a form of critical retelling. Thus I now turn to two stories, which I bring into dialogue with each other. In both stories, someone who suffers finds a companion story that affects how that person suffers; what can be endured, to what imagined end. The problem that most concerns me is understanding when a story is or is not a *good* companion. That is, if companion stories generally have a part, and often a significant part, in conducting action, when can we say they conduct action *well*, in a Aristotelian sense of enhancing persons' flourishing, their good life? With respect to stories that are companions in suffering, I propose three markers of being good companions: stories console, they complicate, and they promise. Although how a companion story does each of these things varies with the life that is in crisis.

1. Willy's Companion Story

Cheryl Mattingly's *The Paradox of Hope* (2010) reports a thirteen-year ethnographic study of families in which a child is chronically or critically ill. Among the many children, parents, and clinicians whom Mattingly describes, the most compelling to me is a boy she calls Willy. Thinking about Willy has helped me understand how my ideas about suffering and storytelling have shifted over the last several years.

Willy is one of several children whom Mattingly is surprised to find having significant companionships with particular Disney stories. These children surround themselves with objects that merchandise the stories (sheets, pajamas, action figures), and they take on roles from the stories. Willy's companionship is with the character Buzz Lightyear from the Disney/Pixar film *Toy Story*. Willy suffered extensive burns in a household accident, and he spends his childhood having a series of painful reconstructive facial surgeries. To minimize scarring, Willy must wear a fitted mask, all day, everyday. Conflicts over wearing the mask are minimized when Willy begins to identify with masked action heroes, especially Buzz Lightyear. Buzz wears a mask required by his travels in outer space, where he encounters toxic air. Buzz at first insists on wearing his visor at all times, because he believe

¹ Among many examples that could be cited, the story of the corpus known as the *Thousand and One Nights* is especially fascinating for its cosmopolitan travels; see Warner.

earth's air is toxic. In Buzz's companionship, wearing a mask becomes a viable possibility within the life story that Willy is enacting.

Mattingly emphasizes that Willy does not simply see *Toy Story* and recognize an affinity to Buzz. Willy does creative work to make Buzz into the companion he needs. For example, in *Toy Story*, Buzz narrowly escapes mutilating surgery attempted by the evil boy next door. In Willy's adaptation of the story, Buzz actually has surgeries every time Willy goes to the hospital for surgery.

To describe the narrative work Willy and other children do, Mattingly uses the verb *indigenize*; children indigenize mass-media stories. Willy changes Buzz's story to fit his life and its needs, but reciprocally, Buzz changes Willy's life by making possible ways of acting that were otherwise very difficult. Thus the relationship between humans and companion stories is marked by on-going mutual adaptation. We humans adapt stories as we retell them, and the stories shape how we are or are not adaptable to what life confronts us with. Humans and stories are *symbiotic* in their mutual need.

Willy's particular symbiosis with Buzz's story is not one of the relations of storytelling that I imagined in the mid-1990s when I wrote *The Wounded Storyteller*. Then, my argument was that how people told their own stories affected how they suffered. I realized people drew upon shared narrative templates in order to be able to tell stories, and to make their stories intelligible to others; describing those templates is the core of the book's argument. And I realized that people often lacked narrative resources necessary to tell stories sufficient to represent their experiences. Two decades later, I am more radical in arguing that stories not only report or witness experience. Stories enable knowing what counts as experience, because stories organize perception into plots, scenes, and the sense of being a character with purpose. The lack of narrative resources leads to a perceptual chaos; no foreground readily emerges from the mass of sensory input; nothing counts more than anything else. To fill this lack, especially children need to *borrow* stories. At first these stories seem to be borrowed whole, and then they are progressively indigenized (to use Mattingly's verb) to become the person's own (Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* 197 ff.).

Willy does not tell a story of his life, at least directly. He *enacts* his life on at least two levels. First, he responds to people and events around him; for example, he submits to demands of treatment, with more or less resistance. On another level, these responses are enabled by Willy retelling, to himself and to others, his indigenized versions of Buzz's story. Buzz stories are more than allegorical tellings of Willy's experience. To say that Buzz's story is Willy's companion is to recognize that Buzz's story enables Willy to be who he is, in the conditions he must endure. And reciprocally, Willy gives Buzz an enhanced existence in the hospital room.

The best I can summarize my shift in perspective is to say that Willy is a more *dialogical* wounded storyteller than I imagined in the 1990s. *Willy's story emerges at the intersection of his companion stories*, among which Buzz Lightyear is currently his privileged companion.

Willy seems to have found a good companion in Buzz, but lives do not always work out that well. Precisely because stories are powerful, they are dangerous (Frank, "The Necessity and Dangers of Illness Narratives, Especially at the End of Life"). To be more precise: companionship with some stories is dangerous for some people, in some circumstances, and I would add that some companionships might be dangerous to some stories.²

² One example is the Nazi use of Nordic myths as legislated companion stories in political mobilization. The stories suffered in that appropriation. David Grossman's nuanced interpretations of the Samson story as a companion in contemporary Israeli cultural and political life (*Lion's Honey*) raise more complex

Thus, as we move to adult companionship with stories, the plots of the best companion stories include the protagonist falling in with a bad companion story and the risks of that companionship. In the best adult companion story, several stories are told within a frame story, and the hero has to make an existential choice which among these stories will be his or her privileged companion. That, I believe, is a choice all of us are making all the time, and it is crucial to the moral progress of our lives. Choosing among competing stories *is* human moral progress.

2. Philoctetes' Choice

Companion stories present themselves to consciousness as always-already there; their mediating function seems built into perception itself. Life can be called *moral* when a contest between companion stories is reflectively recognized, generally in times of crisis.³ That contest between companion stories is illustrated by Sophocles' penultimate play, *Philoctetes*. As it presents that contest and the necessity of choice, *Philoctetes* makes itself a good companion story.

The ancient Greeks offer evocative models of good companion stories because suffering is presented *as a whole*. Suffering in Greek tragedy is never of the body alone, but rather displays a seamless linkage of body, soul, community, and gods. Modernity, exemplified by medicine, does its work by fragmenting suffering into discrete parts that can each be treated with specific remedies, whether these are drugs for diseases or technologies of accessibility for disabilities. I myself am alive because of modern medicine, so I appreciate medicine's/modernity's capacities to remediate some forms of disease. But one cost for its occasional marvels is that medicine has lost the capacity to recognize the wholeness of suffering.⁴

My argument is that good companion stories have the capacity to respond to suffering in three overlapping, mutually supporting ways: first, they console; second, they provoke, challenge, and complicate how a person is living; and third, they promise a form of hope. I will trace that triad of good companionship—consolation, complication, and promise—through the story of Philoctetes and his exemplary suffering.

In Homer's *Iliad*, Philoctetes is one of the Greek kings who sails off to the Trojan war. Except he never gets to Troy. On the way there, the Greeks stop to pay homage to a particular god. Approaching the shrine, Philoctetes is bitten by a serpent guarding the sacred space. His wound festers and causes a terrible stench. Even more offensive than the smell, Philoctetes' screams of pain are so violent that they disrupt the Greeks' sacrificial rites. Odysseus is ordered to abandon Philoctetes on the island of Lemnos, and there Homer leaves him.

Sophocles picks up Philoctetes' story ten years after he has been abandoned. Sophocles' imaginary Lemnos is uninhabited and uninhabitable: "This is Lemnos," Odysseus says in the first, foreboding words of the play; "No man lives here—even steps here" (Sophocles 33). Philoctetes is able to survive because he possesses Hercules' bow, whose arrows never

issues of a story's necessity and danger. The Samson story is definitely being kept alive, but whether its contemporary usages violate its biblical intent is contestable—as that original intent is open to multiple interpretations.

³ Not the least difficulty of this contest is that it always takes place on some narrative ground. I agree with those who argue that there is no outside of stories for human perception.

⁴ To find when medicine may have once had this capacity to see suffering whole, I believe one has to go back a very long way; see Kearney. The usage of medicine *losing* this perception is thus questionable.

miss their target. When Hercules knew he had been poisoned and would die in agony, he built a funeral pyre for himself, preferring immolation. But among his companions, only the young Philoctetes would light the pyre. In gratitude, Hercules gave Philoctetes his bow and magical arrows. The bow is more than Philoctetes' means of survival on Lemnos. The story is pervaded by the question of what the bow signifies.

Philoctetes' life on Lemnos fits the general type of illness narrative that *The Wounded Storyteller* calls the chaos narrative. His wound is the bodily pain for which any articulate description is inadequate. When Philoctetes has one of his fits of pain—seizure seems the best description—his speech is interrupted by cries that the classicist Norman Austin describes as “sheer inhuman noise” (119). Austin writes that in the play, “the words are shredded by the pain” (119). That expresses perfectly what I mean by chaos: the overwhelming of narrative order by brute suffering.

Companionship with Philoctetes consoles those who hear his story just as Philoctetes is consoled by the story of the suffering of Hercules. Philoctetes' eventual fate will be crucially affected by his having Hercules' story as his companion. At the end of the play, when the action is deadlocked, Hercules appears. “First, I'll remind you of my fortunes, what sufferings and agonies I endured” (Sophocles 96), he tells Philoctetes. The story of Philoctetes's sufferings and agonies can console whoever hears his story because that story universalizes suffering as human plight.⁵

Beyond offering consolation, the good companion story provokes its listener to ask questions that are uncomfortable because they complicate life. If Philoctetes' life is made sustainable by his bow, the bow also complicates his story, both for himself and for those who hear his story. The literary critic Edmund Wilson made his essay on *Philoctetes* the title piece of a collection called *The Wound and the Bow*, first published in 1929. Wilson poses the question that, for me, is a kind of Zen koan: what do the wound and the bow have to do with each other? How does each depend upon the other? For someone who suffers, these questions might then include: Does the resource that sustains me in my suffering also, somehow, sustain that suffering?

I propose understanding the bow primarily as *the materialization of a story*; it is both material and symbolic. In its material form, the bow is the tool by which Philoctetes hunts and survives. The bow's symbolic form recalls the story of Hercules giving it to Philoctetes—it connects him to the gods. Again, Austin's interpretation expresses it perfectly: “Though [the bow] remains on earth to function as an earthly weapon, the bow is also a signifier of Philoctetes' exalted status as a holy man” (104).

For those who hear *Philoctetes* from the position of their own suffering, the bow provokes the question of what connects their earthly, embodied life to transcendent, spiritual forces. Should a reader despair that she or he has no bow, the response is that they have the story. When the companion story provokes, it also consoles.

Philoctetes' wound at first seems a very different provocation. The wound stigmatizes him. Philoctetes' life is a perfect example of Erving Goffman's 1963 description of stigma as spoiled identity. Philoctetes was a king, at least a war lord; his wound renders him fit for abandonment. Like the bow, the wound is both material and symbolic. Sophocles, who may have had medical training, vividly evokes the physical disgust of the wound. In its symbolic aspect, the wound constantly reminds Philoctetes of the story of Odysseus and

⁵ For the description of a project to bring *Philoctetes* to those who need consolation, see Doerries. The descriptive word *plight* is favored by Jerome Bruner (*Making Stories*). For me, it emphasizes that in good stories, someone or something is always at risk.

the Greek army abandoning him on Lemnos. This abandonment story is also Philoctetes' companion and as much a part of his suffering as his putrid foot.

If the story of the bow links Philoctetes to virtue and the divine, his companion story of abandonment reinforces his hatred of the Greek army, its commanders, and its chief fixer, Odysseus, who in Sophocles' version has none of the virtues of the Homeric character. Although, Odysseus's objectives are not in themselves without the merit of necessity, as the play's chorus reminds both Philoctetes and its listeners.

For a story of suffering to be a good companion, it needs its wound and its bow. As I said earlier, these do not oppose each other; they require each other. As the story establishes the mutual dependence of the wound and the bow, it conducts its companions to recognize suffering as a whole.

The agonistic contest required by the story's genre begins when Philoctetes is joined on his island by others. The Trojan War is stalemated. A prophecy tells that the Greeks will conquer Troy only if two conditions are met. First, they must enlist the young warrior Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles who by now has been killed. Second, the Greeks must reenlist Philoctetes, without whose bow there cannot be victory. The interpretation of the prophecy—later hedged by Odysseus—is that Philoctetes's bow alone is not sufficient; he himself must come to Troy, and he must come willingly. After the Greeks bring Neoptolemos to Troy, they send him with Odysseus to convince Philoctetes to join them. The full prophecy further states that if Philoctetes comes to Troy, his wound will be healed, and he will become the greatest of the Greeks as he secures victory.

Sophocles' play begins with Neoptolemos and Odysseus arriving on Lemnos. Odysseus knows that Philoctetes hates him and the Greeks, and he argues that they can succeed only by tricking Philoctetes. Odysseus plans to hide, and he concocts a false story for Neoptolemos to tell to Philoctetes. In Odysseus' fabricated story, Neoptolemos has been enlisted by the Greeks, but when he arrived at Troy, he was denied his father's armor, which had already been awarded to Odysseus. Neoptolemos thus presents himself as sailing home in anger. Odysseus' plot is that Philoctetes, hearing this story, will ask Neoptolemos to rescue him from Lemnos and will willingly get on his ship. But instead of taking Philoctetes home, Neoptolemos will instead sail to Troy. Neoptolemos recoils from participating in this deception—it goes against his nature as a warrior who fights face to face, without tricks—but Odysseus, his senior and appointed commander in the expedition, convinces him.

Odysseus' fabricated story succeeds in seducing Philoctetes into welcoming Neoptolemos and asking him for passage home. Events seem headed toward a speedy conclusion, but on the way to the ship, Philoctetes has one of his seizures of pain. As he feels himself being seized, he entrusts the bow to Neoptolemos to hold, cautioning him to say a prayer before receiving it, lest the gods be jealous of Neoptolemos possessing the bow, however temporarily. Neoptolemos holding the sacred bow complicates his life.

At this point, *Philoctetes* becomes more complicated as a drama, and the demand of its companionship becomes more intense. I went to the story of Philoctetes expecting to hear about a body in pain, and that is how the story begins. But as the story progresses, Neoptolemos becomes as much the protagonist as Philoctetes. Each is tested by events. Neoptolemos has always disliked participating in Odysseus' trickery. As he holds the bow, his care for Philoctetes contests against his allegiance to the Greek army. The struggle for Neoptolemos' soul becomes the foreground drama.

In this shift of protagonists, the story provokes its companions to recognize that their suffering is often mirrored in others, and those who care for them may face their own conflicts. If we understand Neoptolemos as a recurring figure in dramas of suffering and

care, one of his contemporary forms is the young, idealistic physician or nurse whose sense of the patient's best interest conflicts with institutional priorities that are represented by a senior clinician who requires the the junior colleague to follow the institutional line.

This plot is the basis of a wonderfully dark short story by the physician Howard Brody. In "The Chief of Medicine," Brody adapts Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor parable from *The Brothers Karamazov*. A hospitalized patient is dying, but the medical staff continues interventions as if cure were still possible. A medical student assigned to the case can no longer stand the deception and tells the family the true state of affairs. The chief of medicine at first threatens to expel her for her failure to adhere to the principle that patients need to believe in their physicians' power. On his account, deception serves the collective interest by sustaining what people need most, which is being able to believe in the saving power of medicine.

Brody's chief of medicine presents a contemporary version of Odysseus' argument that sustaining the greater good requires subterfuge. This argument is not strictly wrong. Austin observes that every army needs an Odysseus, and Brody complicates the question of what chief of medicine every hospital needs. But even if the Odyssean strategy seems necessary, it is dangerous. Odysseus exemplifies what Kant's ethics object to: treating people as the means to an end.

Neoptolemos is pulled one way and then the other. He refuses to return the bow to Philoctetes, but then he defies Odysseus and hands the bow back to Philoctetes, finally telling him the prophecy's promise that when Philoctetes returns to Troy, he will be healed and lead the Greeks to victory. Neoptolemos' conflict is now resolved, and Philoctetes again becomes the protagonist.

Here, we finally reach the contest between two companion stories, each of which claims to conduct Philoctetes's future actions. The contest is between the story that Neoptolemos has just told him—the story of healing and glory—and his old companion story of bitterness toward the Greeks. Remarkably to the contemporary imagination, but just as Odysseus has predicted, Philoctetes opts for hatred, refusing to go to Troy. Neoptolemos has pledged to do whatever Philoctetes chooses, and he agrees to take him home. We hardly need a critic to see that if the story ended here, it would be a tragedy. But I note that when Philoctetes decides against healing, he implies that his physical pain is the lesser part of his suffering. The stigma and abandonment are the most intolerable parts, and responding to them is paramount.

The story, however, does not end there. Here we reach the third capacity of a good companion story: it promises, and its promise is a form of hope.

Hercules, now a god, descends from Olympus to advise, even command Philoctetes. For Hercules' entrance, Sophocles employs the often maligned narrative device of the *deus ex machina*, literally the god who is lowered into the action on a platform and resolves the conflict by fiat. In the poet Seamus Heaney's adaptation (*The Cure at Troy*), Philoctetes reports Hercules's presence as a voice in his head, and the chorus then speaks in the voice of Hercules. However the figure of Hercules enters, what does it represent for those who hear *Philoctetes* as a companion story of suffering?

Consistent with the interpretation proposed earlier, the intervention of Hercules—or more precisely, Philoctetes' capacity to hear Hercules—is an effect of Philoctetes' long companionship with that story. At this crucial junction in the action—when the final, fateful decision must be made—one companion story has to win the contest; the two stories can no longer co-exist. Why the Hercules story wins is not, I think, something we should even try to explain. The point seems to be that companionship with *Philoctetes*, a story in

which the protagonist has to choose stories and chooses well, can help us to know which stories we allow to be our companions. The *Philoctetes* story thus becomes a meta-narrative of the necessity of choice between competing stories. This story does not offer principles of how to choose the story that will lead to the good. Instead, the story offers itself as a companion to conduct future choices.

3. Stories and Care

My concluding comment is to note that the companionship between humans and stories is a relation of care. One word that evokes care in *Philoctetes* is *symparastates*. To quote Austin one last time, he writes that: “Neoptolemos is learning to be what Philoctetes had needed, truly his *symparastates*, the man who stands beside him and becomes one with him” (124). That need to learn what is needed, most truly needed, is mutual. Philoctetes has to learn to accept Neoptolemos as the one whom he needs to stand by him. The relationship between Neoptolemos and Philoctetes mirrors the relationship between the suffering person and his or her companion story. The companion story’s promise is to be the suffering person’s *symparastates*, standing by its companion, guiding him or her, but the person also reshapes the story. Any relation of care is a dialogical process: each comes to speak in the voice of the other, shaping and being shaped by the other.

Hercules’ story guides Philoctetes specifically to overcome his hatred and accept healing. The change extends to how Philoctetes perceives the world; or, how the world is given to his perception. As Philoctetes finally departs from Lemnos, he delivers a farewell speech to the island that contains what may be the most lyrical lines in the entire play. Lemnos, which was first presented as desolate, is now described as nurturing, the “chamber that kept watch over me” (Sophocles 97). He describes the island that has cared for him now becoming “the keel under me and the ballast inside me” (Heaney 80). That metaphor describes the good companion story: keel and balast, keeping life upright and able to be steered.

Philoctetes’s shift in his perception of Lemnos is not an expression of the banality that suffering is only as bad as the sufferer’s perception makes it—that would trivialize the whole story, making it a poor companion. The cave is still a place where Philoctetes describes his head as being “drenched by the south wind’s beating” (Sophocles 97). The agony of his wound is not erased by some alchemy of perceptual shift. But Philoctetes is now living a new story. In that story, the place where there was only pain and abandonment can now be recognized as offering nurture and forms of companionship.

My final reason for holding up *Philoctetes* as the model of a companion story is that as the hero leaves for Troy, his fate may be decreed but it is not yet achieved. The prophecy’s promise still requires Philoctetes’ action in order to be fulfilled. Herakles’ final admonition is to tell Philoctetes and Neoptolemos “when you conquer the land...respect what is sacred to the gods” (Sophocles 97). As the ancient Greek audience knew the story of how Troy was conquered, that respect was not shown. Again, the companion story conducts, but it never determines.

Philoctetes gives us a primal version of all the companion stories—including Buzz Lightyear as a companion for Willy—that console us. These stories complicate our lives with hard questions, including the question of which story should be our companion, because multiple stories often compete to conduct us. Ultimately, companion stories promise us a future, but unlike the specific promises that the gods make to Philoctetes, the promises

most humans hear are like those offered to Willy, open-ended. We have to follow the story to discover what it promises.

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